

Welfare of Oregon's children slipping

PORTLAND (AP) — The well-being of Oregon children has slipped over the last year according to a recent nationwide report on kids, crime, poverty and health.

In a snapshot of all states published in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 1999 annual Kids Count Data Book, Oregon's ranking dropped to 29th place from last year's spot of 23rd.

"We were never a shining star," said Gary Dombroff, director of Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit advocacy group. "But this has been a pernicious, precipitous drop."

The study, which gauges the quality of children's lives through trends in crime, poverty, health and other factors, is considered one of the most comprehensive measurements of child well-being in the nation. Although many of the report's statistics date back to 1996, the effort produces one of the only comparisons among states.

In this year's study, New Hampshire ranked the highest in child well-being; the District of Columbia held the lowest spot.

In Oregon, the study bears the worst news for teen-agers: While the national dropout rate dipped by 9 percent from 1985 to 1996, Oregon's high school dropout rate has jumped by 33 percent. More than a quarter of Oregon students quit school before they're scheduled to graduate.

Oregon's ranking is particularly alarming to children's advocates because of the state's relatively healthy economy. In the early 1990s, the state held a prouder 18th ranking.

"There are kids who live now who never would have made it years ago," she said.

But children welfare advocates say the slip in the national

ranking signals that Oregon communities have given less support to children over the past decade.

"What you're seeing is a steady decline in (support,)"

Dombroff of Children First said. "The main impact has been a shift of resources away from children and families. It's benign neglect, but it's very sad."



The report cites several factors as having the most profound effect on families — poverty, unemployed parents, single parent households, lack of health insurance, poor parental education and welfare dependence.

And those factors have not been combated with effective public spending, said Bob Applegate, spokesman for Gov. John Kitzhaber.

"We've been scrimping on public programs that would help at-risk kids for years," he said.

According to the study, Oregon children also face some grim death statistics. Nationally, the death rate for children, ages 1-14, dropped from 34 to 26 children per 100,000. But Oregon's rate has remained at about 29 over the past decade.

Still, there is some good news regarding infant mortality, which decreased by nearly half from about 10 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1985 to about 6 deaths in 1996.

Lisa Millet, manager for child fatality and injury prevention at the Oregon Health Division, attributes the decrease to improved neonatal programs around the state.

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